

Kummer Frederic Arnold

The Ivory Snuff Box



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Arnold Fredericks

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CHAPTER I

The last thing that sounded in Richard Duvall's ears as he left the office of Monsieur Lefevre, Prefect of Police of Paris, were the latter's words, spoken in a voice of mingled confidence and alarm, "The fortunes of a nation may depend upon your faithfulness. Go, and God be with you." He entered the automobile which was drawn up alongside the curb, and accompanied by Vernet, one of the Prefect's assistants, was soon threading the torrent of traffic which pours through the *Rue de Rivoli*.

The thoughts which lay uppermost in the detective's mind were of Grace, his wife; Grace Ellicott, who had become Grace Duvall but little more than an hour before. By this time he had expected to be on his way to Cherbourg, *en route* to New York, with Grace by his side. They had looked forward so happily to their honeymoon, on shipboard, and now – he found himself headed for London on this mysterious expedition, and Grace waiting for him in vain at the *pension*. The thought was maddening. He swore softly to himself as he looked out at the crowded street.

Monsieur Lefevre had no right to ask so great a sacrifice of him, he grumbled. What if he had distinguished himself, made himself the Prefect's most valued assistant, during the past six or eight months? The matters which had brought him from New York to Paris had all been definitely concluded – Grace and he were married – his plans had all been made, to return to America, and home. Now at the last moment, it was frightfully exasperating to have Monsieur Lefevre insist that matters of so grave a nature had occurred, that the honor of his very country was at stake, and to call upon him, Duvall, as the one man who could set matters right. Of course, it was very flattering, but he wanted, not flattery, but Grace, and all the happiness which lay before them. What, after all, was this matter, this affair so vague and mysterious, into which he had so unexpectedly been thrown? He drew out the instructions which the Prefect had hurriedly thrust into his hands, and looked at them with eager curiosity.

They covered but one side of a small sheet of paper. "Visit immediately number 87, *Rue de Richelieu*," they said. "It is a small curio shop. Monsieur Dufrenne, the proprietor, expects you, and will join you at once. Proceed without delay to London and report to Monsieur de Grissac, the French Ambassador. He has lost an ivory snuff box, which you must recover as quickly as possible. You will find money enclosed herewith. Monsieur Dufrenne you can trust in all things. God be with you. – Lefevre."

It was the first time that Duvall had read the instructions. He had not had an opportunity to do so before. As he concluded his examination of them, his face hardened, his brow contracted in a frown, and he crushed the piece of paper in his hand. Was this some absurd joke that Monsieur Lefevre was playing upon him? The idea of separating him from Grace upon their wedding day, to send him on an expedition, the object of which was to recover a lost snuff box! It seemed preposterous. In his anger he muttered an exclamation which attracted the attention of Vernet. He was, in fact, on the point of stopping the automobile, and going at once to the *pension* where Grace was waiting for him, her trunks packed for their wedding journey. The impassive face of the Frenchman beside him relaxed a trifle, as he saw Duvall's agitation. "What is it, Monsieur Duvall?" he inquired.

"Do you know anything about this matter that makes it necessary for me to go to London?" demanded Duvall.

"Nothing, monsieur, except that your train leaves – " he consulted his watch – "in twenty minutes."

Duvall drew out a cigar and lit it, with a gesture of annoyance. "The matter does not appear very important," he grumbled.

Vernet permitted a slight smile to cross his usually immobile face. "I have been in the service of the Prefect for ten years," he remarked, "and I have learned that he wastes very little time upon unimportant things." He leaned out and spoke to the chauffeur, and in a moment the car halted before a dingy little shop, on the lower floor of an old and dilapidated-looking house. "Here is the place of Monsieur Dufrenne," he remarked significantly.

Duvall threw open the door of the cab, and entered the dusty and cobwebbed doorway. He found himself in a small dimly lighted room, so crowded with curios of all sorts that he at first did not perceive the little white-haired old man who bent over a jeweler's work bench in one corner. The walls were lined with shelves, upon which stood bits of ivory and porcelain, miniatures of all sorts, old pieces of silverware, bronze and copper, old coins, and rusty antique weapons. About the walls stood innumerable pictures, old and cracked, in dilapidated-looking frames, while from the ceiling were suspended bits of rusty armor, swords, brass censers, Chinese lamps, and innumerable other objects, the use of which he could scarcely guess.

All these things he saw, in a queer jumble of impressions, as his eyes swept the place. In a moment the little old man in the corner turned, peering at him over his steel-rimmed spectacles. "You wish to see me, monsieur?" he inquired in a thin, cracked voice.

"Yes. I am Richard Duvall. I come from Monsieur the Prefect of Police."

The man at the workbench, on hearing these words, rose to his insignificant height, dropping as he did so the watch over which he had been working. He swept his tools into a drawer with a single gesture, turned to the wall behind him, drew on a thin gray overcoat and a dark slouch hat, and stepped from behind the counter. "I am ready, monsieur," he remarked, without a trace of agitation or excitement. "Let us go."

Duvall turned to the door without further words, and threw it open. The old man motioned to him to pass out, and after the detective had done so, closed and locked the door carefully and followed him into the cab. Duvall observed that he was frail, and uncertain in his steps, and so bent from constant labor over his bench, that he gave one almost the impression of being hunchbacked. He took his seat beside the detective without a word, and in a moment the whole party was being driven rapidly toward the *Gare du Nord*.

Duvall could not repress a feeling of admiration for the way in which Dufrenne had received him. He had asked no questions, delayed him by no preparations, but had merely thrown down his tools, put on his hat, and started out. The importance or lack of importance of the matters which called him he did not inquire into – it was evidently quite enough, that Monsieur Lefevre desired his services. It made the detective feel somewhat ashamed of his recent ill nature, yet he could not but remember that this was his wedding day, and that in leaving his wife without even so much as a farewell word, he had given her good reason for doubting his love for her. Of course, he knew, the Prefect had assured him that he would explain everything to Grace, but such explanations were not likely to appeal very strongly to a girl who had been married but little more than an hour. It was, therefore, in a very dissatisfied frame of mind that he entered the compartment of the train for Boulogne.

The compartment was a smoking one, and he and Dufrenne had it all to themselves. The little old Frenchman drew out a much-stained meerschaum pipe and began placidly to smoke it. His manner toward the detective was respectful, friendly indeed, yet he made no attempts at conversation, and seemed quite satisfied to sit and gaze out of the car window at the fields and villages as they swept by. Presently Duvall spoke.

"Monsieur Dufrenne," he began, slowly, "you are no doubt familiar with the matter which takes us to London?"

Dufrenne withdrew his gaze from the window and faced about in his seat with a nervous little gesture of assent. "I understand that Monsieur de Grissac has been robbed of his snuff box," he replied.

"Is that all you know?" Duvall inquired pointedly. "Surely the recovery of an article of so little consequence cannot be the real purpose of our visit."

The little old man shrugged his shoulders, with an almost imperceptible gesture of dissent. "I know nothing of the matter, monsieur," he remarked, significantly, "except that my country has called me, and that I am here." He spoke the words proudly, as though he considered the fact that he had been called upon an honor.

"But surely, you must have some idea, monsieur, of your purpose in being here?"

"Yes. That is indeed quite simple. On one occasion I was called upon to repair the snuff box of Monsieur de Grissac, the Ambassador. In that way I am familiar with its appearance. Now that it is lost, I am requested to accompany you, monsieur, in your attempt to recover it, in order that I may assist you in identifying it."

"And beyond that, you know nothing?"

"Nothing, monsieur."

Duvall began to chew the end of his cigar in vexation. Of all the absurd expeditions, this seemed the most absurd. Presently he turned to Dufrenne and again spoke. "In your repairs upon this snuff box, to which so great a value is apparently attached, did you observe anything about it of a peculiar nature – anything to make its loss a matter of such grave importance?"

"Nothing, monsieur. It is a small, round ivory box, with a carved top, quite plain and of little value – "

"But the contents? What, perhaps, did Monsieur de Grissac carry within it?"

"Snuff, monsieur. It was quite half-full when it came to me, last April. Monsieur de Grissac was in Paris at the time. The spring which actuates the top had become broken – the box is very old, monsieur – and I was required to repair it. That is all I know."

"And you close your shop, and leave Paris without a word, just for a thing like that?"

Dufrenne straightened his bent shoulders, and his eyes sparkled. "When France calls me, monsieur, I have nothing to do but obey."

His reply seemed almost in the nature of a reproof. Duvall made no further comment and relapsed into a brown study. After all, he knew, even in his irritation, that Monsieur Lefevre had not sent him upon this adventure without some real and very good reason. Yet try as he would, he was unable to imagine what this reason could be. Of course, there must have been something inside the box, his final conclusion was, else why should any one have stolen it? No doubt the Ambassador, Monsieur de Grissac, would acquaint him with the truth of the affair. Possibly the box may have contained papers of great value – though why one should choose such a place for the concealment of valuable papers he could not imagine. The whole affair seemed shrouded in mystery, and no amount of speculation on his part, apparently, would throw any light upon it. He lay back in his seat, dozing, and thinking of Grace and their interrupted honeymoon.

At Boulogne they transferred to the boat for Folkstone, and after a quiet passage, found themselves on board the train for London. They reached Charing Cross early in the evening, and taking a cab, drove at once to Monsieur de Grissac's residence in Piccadilly, opposite Green Park.

CHAPTER II

While Richard Duvall was thus flying toward Boulogne, racking his brains in a futile attempt to discover the reasons for his sudden and unexpected dispatch to London, Grace, his wife, equally mystified, was proceeding in the direction of Brussels.

The reasons for her going to Brussels were no more clear to her than were Richard's, to him. At the conclusion of the wedding breakfast which had followed her simple marriage to Duvall, she had gone to the *pension* at which she had been living, to await her husband's return. She had not then understood the mysterious message which had summoned him to the Prefect's office, nor, for that matter, had he, but he had assured her that he would return in a short while, and that had been enough for her.

Her patient waiting had been finally terminated by the arrival of the Prefect himself, who had explained with polite brevity that a matter of the gravest importance had made it necessary for him to send Richard at once to London.

The girl's grief and alarm had been great – Monsieur Lefevre had at last, however, succeeded in convincing her that Richard could not under the circumstances have done anything but go. His position as an assistant to Lefevre, and more particularly the friendship which existed between them, made it imperative for him to come to the Prefect's assistance in this crisis.

What the crisis was, Grace did not learn. She had insisted upon following Richard, upon being near him, upon assisting him, should opportunity offer, and Monsieur Lefevre, seized with a sudden inspiration, had dispatched her to Brussels, with the assurance that she would not only see her husband very soon, but might be able to render both him, and France, a very signal service.

Grace had accepted the mission; her desire to be near Richard was a compelling motive, and as a result she found herself flying toward the Belgian frontier, on an early afternoon express, with no idea whatever of what lay before her, and only a few words, written by Monsieur Lefevre upon a page torn from his notebook, to govern her future actions.

She luckily was able to find a compartment in one of the first-class carriages where she could be alone, and sank back upon the cushioned seat, determined to face whatever dangers the future might hold, for the sake of her husband.

Her mind traveled, in retrospect, over the events of the past few months – the conspiracy against her, by her step-uncle, Count d'Este, by which he had so nearly deprived her of the fortune left to her by her aunt, and the striking way in which his plans had been upset by Richard Duvall. She had loved him at their very first meeting, and now that they had become husband and wife, she loved him more than ever. It is small wonder that the thought of the way in which he had been suddenly torn from her, on the eve of their wedding journey, brought tears to her eyes.

Presently she regained her composure and looked at the sheet of paper which the Prefect had handed to her. It contained but a few words: "Proceed to the Hotel Metropole, Brussels. Take a room in the name of Grace Ellicott, and wait further instructions." That was all – no hint of how or when she and Richard were to meet, or what had been the cause of their separation. Once more the cruelty of the situation brought tears to her eyes. While feeling in her handbag for her handkerchief, she drew out the small silver ring which the Prefect had handed to her at the last moment. "Trust any one," he had said, "who comes to you with such a token as this." She examined the ring carefully, but the singular device worked in gold upon the silver band, meant nothing to her. At length she placed the ring carefully upon her finger, and proceeded to cover it by putting on her glove.

For a long time she sat, speculating upon the strange workings of fate, which doomed her to be thus speeding alone to Brussels, instead of to Cherbourg, *en route* to America, with Richard by her side. The sight of two lovers, who boarded the train at St. Quentin, increased her dissatisfaction. They came into the compartment, evidently quite wrapped up in each other, and even the presence

of a third person did not prevent them from holding each other's hands under the cover of a friendly magazine, and gazing at each other with longing eyes. Grace was quite unable to endure the sight of their happiness – she turned away and buried herself in her thoughts.

Presently the adventure-loving side of her nature began to assert itself. Richard had been sent on a mission of the greatest importance – one involving, Monsieur Lefevre had told her, the honor of both his country and himself. And she was to share it – to take part in its excitement, its dangers. The thought stirred all her love of the mysterious, the unusual. After all, since she had become the wife of a man whose profession in life was the detection of crime, should she not herself take an interest, an active part in his work, and thereby encourage and assist him? The thought made her impatient of all delay – she felt herself almost trying to urge the train to quicker motion – she was glad when at last they roared into the station at Brussels.

Grace had never before been in the Belgian capital, but she summoned a cab, and proceeded without difficulty to the Hotel Metropole. Here she was assigned to a small suite, and at once began to unpack the steamer trunk which was the only baggage she had brought with her. It was after four o'clock when she had completed this task, and had removed the stains of travel and changed her gown. As she came into the tiny parlor which formed the second of the two rooms of the suite, she heard a tapping at the door, and upon opening it, discovered one of the hotel maids, waiting outside with fresh towels. The girl came in, and busied herself setting to rights the toilet articles on the washstand. Grace, who was engaged in listlessly watching the traffic in the square outside, paid no attention to her. Presently she heard the girl come in from the bedroom, and inquire if there was anything else that she could do for her. "Nothing," she replied, without turning. The maid, however, did not leave the room, but stood near by, observing her. Grace faced about. "That is all," she said sharply.

"I have something to say to you, mademoiselle," the girl whispered in a low tone, as she took a step forward. "A message from Monsieur Lefevre."

"Monsieur Lefevre? You?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, I am in his confidence. I know the purpose of your visit here, and I come to give you further instructions." She spoke quietly, impressively, and Grace was convinced that she was what she represented herself to be. Still, she felt the necessity of caution. "Please explain," she remarked, without further committing herself.

The girl approached still closer, and reaching into the bosom of her dress, drew out a ring similar to the one which the Prefect had given Grace. It was attached to a bit of ribbon. She glanced at the ring on Grace's finger and smiled. "May I suggest, mademoiselle," she said, "that you place the ring you are wearing where it will be less conspicuous?"

Grace colored slightly at the criticism which the woman's words implied, but drew the ring from her finger and placed it in her purse. "What have you to say to me?" she inquired.

"This, mademoiselle. Certain persons, whose identity is not known to the police, have committed a theft in London – in fact, have stolen a valuable article from the French Ambassador there, Monsieur de Grissac. This theft was committed this morning."

"What did they steal?" asked Grace.

"Monsieur de Grissac's ivory snuff box, mademoiselle."

"His snuff box? You don't mean to say that they are making all this fuss over a trifling thing like a snuff box?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. Such is, indeed, the case."

"But why?"

"That I cannot tell. I do not know. It is sufficient to me that Monsieur Lefevre wishes it recovered. In our service, mademoiselle, we are not supposed to ask questions, but to obey orders."

Grace repressed her annoyance as best she could. "I suppose it must be very valuable," she remarked, lamely.

"Undoubtedly. Very valuable, as you say. Now that it is stolen, it must be recovered without delay. Monsieur Lefevre informs us here in Brussels that others have gone to London to recover it. Should they fail to do so – we believe that the persons who have committed the theft will come here."

"Why?"

"Because they are acting, we believe, in the interests of a certain Dr. Hartmann, who is a resident of Brussels."

"Why should this Dr. Hartmann want the box?" asked Grace, somewhat mystified.

"That I am unable to tell you. He is an enemy of my country. He has many agents, and is a man of great power."

"But why don't you arrest him?"

"Alas, mademoiselle, you do not understand. This Dr. Hartmann is a physician of great prominence. His cures of nervous and mental disorders have made him famous throughout Europe. He has in Brussels – just outside the city, a sanatorium, where he receives and treats his patients. He is looked up to by all. His work as an enemy of France is quite secret, known to but a few. Even we know very little about it."

"Then how do you know that he had anything to do with the matter of this snuff box?"

"We do not know it – we only surmise. There is a reason, which I am not permitted at present to tell you, which causes Monsieur Lefevre to believe that Dr. Hartmann had a hand in this matter. It is for that reason, indeed, that he has sent you here."

"What can I do?"

"I will tell you. For a long time we have tried to get one of our own agents into Dr. Hartmann's house, but without success. He is very shrewd – very cautious. All his servants are countrymen of his, upon whom he knows he can depend. His patients are people of wealth, position, standing, who, he knows, could not possibly be agents of the French police. He will take no others, and always insists upon the strictest references. It is for these reasons that we have failed. Now an opportunity presents itself for you, mademoiselle, to accomplish that which the police cannot accomplish. You are an American girl, of prominent family, of wealth, of position. I am informed that your aunt, by her second marriage, was the Countess d'Este. Should you apply to Dr. Hartmann for treatment, you will have no difficulty in obtaining admission, for he could not, by any chance, think that Miss Grace Ellicott, of New York, was in the employ of the French secret police. You observe, mademoiselle, Monsieur the Prefect's object in sending you to Brussels?"

Grace nodded. She was beginning to feel a keen interest in the matter. "But I am not ill," she said, with a laugh. "How can I ask Dr. Hartmann to treat me?"

"We have thought of that. The matter has been under consideration ever since we were advised, early this afternoon, that you were coming. We have thought it best that you represent yourself to the doctor as a somnambulist."

"A sleep walker?"

"Precisely. It is a form of nervous trouble which is by no means infrequent. We are informed that Dr. Hartmann has treated several such cases in the past. There are not symptoms, except a state of nervousness on the part of the patient which in your case it is probable the excitement of the enterprise will supply, and, of course, the tendency to walking in the sleep. This latter you must assume."

"Assume?"

"Yes. You must pretend to be a somnambulist. You must get up, each night, at some hour, and wander about the house – pretending to be oblivious of all about you. You are not normally conscious. You are in a walking dream. Your eyes are fixed ahead – seeing no one. It will not be difficult for you to pretend all this – and naturally, by wandering about in this way, you may – we hope you will – have excellent opportunities to observe what goes on within the doctor's walls."

"Is that all I am to do – just watch?"

"I think not. If we are unable, by other means, to prevent the stolen box from being delivered to Dr. Hartmann, it must be recovered from him, at any cost – at any cost whatever – " the woman repeated, significantly. "Even life itself cannot be spared, in this case. The box *must be recovered*, no matter what the price we pay – so we are informed by Monsieur Lefevre."

"Then if it should pass into his possession, I may have to steal it? Is that what you mean?"

"Undoubtedly, and at the very first opportunity." The girl rose, gathered up the soiled towels which she had taken from the bedroom, and went toward the door. "That is all, mademoiselle, except that you will communicate to us any news of importance by means of a young man who goes to the house each morning and evening to deliver bread. He comes in a small wagon, and you will no doubt be able to speak with him, as he enters or leaves the grounds. He is quite safe, and can be trusted. Address your communications to him verbally – no letters, understand; they are always dangerous. And now, let me suggest that you arrange to see Dr. Hartmann at once."

"But – he may require reference – credentials."

"We have thought of that, and have prepared the way. One of our men has ascertained that the United States Minister here is acquainted with you – that your family is known to him. Your aunt, you will remember, was quite prominent in society, in New York, at the time she married Monsieur the Count d'Este. Whether the Minister is acquainted with you personally, we have not been able to learn, but that he knows who you are, is certain."

"Then I had best call upon him, and arrange for letters to Dr. Hartmann."

"That is the best course. His house is near by. Take a cab at once, go to him, and state your errand. You will have no difficulty, I feel sure." She noiselessly opened the door, and in a moment was gone, leaving Grace in a state of wonder. She did not waste much time, however, in speculating upon the curious affair in which she found herself involved, but putting on her hat, started off at once in search of the American Minister.

CHAPTER III

When Richard Duvall and his companion entered the house of the French Ambassador in London, it was evident that their arrival was expected. The detective had no more than given his name to the butler who threw open the door, when the latter, with a bow of recognition, conducted them to a small reception-room to the right of the entrance, and informed them that Monsieur de Grissac would see them at once.

They did not have long to wait. The Ambassador, a thin, spare, nervous-looking man of sixty, with white hair and a gray-white mustache, came hurriedly into the room after but a few moments had elapsed, and greeting them excitedly, bade them be seated. He himself remained standing, his back to the fireplace, twirling his eyeglasses at the end of their black silk ribbon, and observing his visitors keenly.

"Monsieur Lefevre had informed me of your coming, gentlemen," he presently burst out. "We have no time to lose."

"Let us have the details of the affair, monsieur," Duvall remarked, seating himself comfortably in his chair. "So far we are completely in the dark."

"You know, do you not, that a valuable article, a small snuff box, to be exact – has been stolen from me?"

"Yes. Of that I have been informed," the detective remarked, dryly. "I am curious to learn why the loss of an article of so trivial a nature should be regarded with such seriousness."

The Ambassador's eyes snapped – he seemed almost to resent the detective's attitude. "It should be sufficient, monsieur, I think, that it is so regarded. The task before us is to recover it – not discuss the reasons for doing so."

"I disagree with you, monsieur. If the real value of the stolen article is kept from me, how can I draw any conclusions as to the probable object of its theft? Was it intrinsically valuable? Did it contain anything of value? In short, why should any one have taken the trouble to steal it? Tell me that, and I can act intelligently. Otherwise, I shall be only groping about in the dark."

"I do not think so, monsieur." The Ambassador bent upon Duvall a searching glance. "The fact that the box is gone should be sufficient. All that I ask is that you recover it. You must trace its disappearance from the material facts of the case. Conjecture will avail us nothing."

"Is the box then of no value?"

"I have not said so. As a matter of fact, its value is great. It has been an heirloom in my family for many years. At one time it belonged to Cardinal Mazarin."

"You think, then, that its intrinsic value alone might have prompted the theft?"

"I think so – indeed, I very greatly hope so."

"Why?"

The Ambassador recovered himself with a start. Evidently he had said more than he intended. It was some time before he answered the question and then he did so lamely. "Its theft by someone interested in its value as a curiosity would enable me to recover it most readily – by the payment, of course, of a sum of money."

"True. But I assume, from what you say, that there might be other reasons; that it might have been taken by those who suspected that it had another value?"

For a moment Monsieur de Grissac appeared confused. Then he waved his hand impatiently. "There are those," he said, "who seek to injure me. They know that I prized this thing highly. Their motive may have been – not money, but revenge. In that case, its recovery will be vastly more difficult."

Duvall saw that Monsieur de Grissac was not being frank with him, and for a moment he was conscious of a deep sense of annoyance. Monsieur Lefevre had, heretofore, invariably taken

him into his confidence. He controlled his feelings, however, and appeared to be satisfied with the Ambassador's explanations. "What did the box contain, Monsieur de Grissac," he asked, pleasantly.

"A quantity of snuff, monsieur."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Oh! And you, monsieur, are in the habit of using snuff?"

"Yes. It is the only form in which I use tobacco. Old-fashioned, perhaps, but I belong to the older generation." He straightened himself up suddenly. "Let us proceed, gentlemen. I fear we are wasting valuable time."

Duvall nodded. "Permit me to ask you a few more questions."

"I am at your service, monsieur."

"When did you last see the box?"

"This morning, at nine o'clock. I always carry it in the right-hand pocket of my waistcoat. To insure its safety, I had it attached to a long gold chain, which was securely fastened to the inside of the pocket. I rose this morning somewhat late, having attended a banquet last night. After having my coffee and rolls in my bedroom, I went to my dressing-room to be shaved. As I did so, I paused for a moment, drew the snuff box from the pocket of my white evening waistcoat, which my valet had hung in a closet the night before, and took a pinch of snuff from it. I then replaced it in the pocket and entered the dressing-room adjoining, where Noël, my man, was waiting for me. He proceeded to shave me as usual, and I began to dress. Upon going to the closet in my bedroom to remove the box, and fasten it by means of the chain to the clasp in the pocket of the waistcoat I had just put on, I was amazed to find it gone. I at once summoned Noël – "

"Summoned him?" interrupted the detective. "Was he not with you in the room?"

"No. A few moments before – as soon, in fact, as I had completed dressing, he left the apartment to give some instructions to my chauffeur."

"What did you do then?"

"I at once rushed out into the hall, calling for Noël."

"You believed, then, that he had taken the box?"

"I could believe nothing else. No one but he had been in my rooms."

"Oh! I see. And you questioned him?"

"Yes. On reaching the hall I met one of the maids ascending the stairway. I called to her, asking if she had seen Noël. She had not. She had been in the servants' hall – talking with the chauffeur – Noël had not been there."

"What did you do then?"

"I rushed to his room, which is on the floor above, thinking that, if he had taken the box, and proposed to deny the fact, he would have gone there to secrete it."

"Would he not have been more likely to leave the house immediately since he knew you would discover your loss at once?"

"No. He would realize that to flee would be to admit his guilt. He could not have gone more than a few hundred feet. Capture would have been inevitable."

"Did you find the man in the room?"

"He was just leaving it as I came up."

"What did you do then?"

"I ordered him back into the room, and questioned him sharply. He denied all knowledge of the matter, and appeared to be deeply hurt at my suspicions."

"Did you believe him?"

"I do not know. The matter is incomprehensible. Noël has been in my service for eight years. I supposed him absolutely incorruptible – absolutely honest. He also insists that after I left the bedroom,

and came into the dressing-room to be shaved, he did not leave me, nor again enter the bedroom; in which case, he could not have committed the theft."

"Is this true?"

"So far as I can remember, it is." He spoke in a slightly hesitating way, and Duvall at once noticed it. "You are, then, not absolutely sure?" he asked.

"I feel confident that Noël did not leave me, nor enter the bedroom. If I hesitated for a moment, it arose from the fact that on one or two occasions I have fallen asleep while being shaved, but this morning I am quite sure that I did not do so."

"Yet you were up late last night, and awoke feeling sleepy and tired."

"Yes." The Ambassador nodded. "That is true."

"Is there any other door to the bedroom?"

"None, except that which opens into my bath. The bathroom has no windows. It is an inside room."

"And the bedroom?"

"It has two windows, facing upon the adjoining property. There is quite thirty feet of space between the two buildings and the windows are at least twenty-five feet from the ground."

"What room is above?"

"A guest's chamber, unused and locked."

Duvall rose and began to stride up and down the room, chewing viciously upon his unlighted cigar. "After you finished questioning the man, what did you do then?"

"I searched his room thoroughly, and made him turn out the contents of his pockets, his trunk and bureau drawers."

"And you found – ?"

"Nothing. That was before noon to-day. Since then, I have kept the man locked in his room, awaiting your coming. One of the other servants has remained on guard outside his door ever since."

"You did not, then, notify the police?"

"No. The matter is one that, for reasons of my own, I do not wish to become public."

"Has anything been heard from your prisoner since this morning?"

"Yes. He asked for pen and ink about one o'clock this afternoon. I went up to see him, to find out why he wanted them. He seemed deeply affected, was almost in tears, and apparently afraid to meet my gaze. He said he wished to write a note, breaking an engagement he had had for this afternoon. He usually had Wednesday afternoons off. I permitted him to write the letter."

Duvall began to show signs of deep interest on hearing this. "Where is it?" he exclaimed.

"What, monsieur?" The Ambassador evidently did not follow him.

"The letter."

"I sent it, of course."

"But you read it first?"

"Yes. It was addressed to a man named Seltz, Oscar Seltz, if I recollect correctly, at a barber shop in Piccadilly Circus, which, as you know, is close by. This fellow Seltz was a friend of Noël's. I have several times heard him speak of him. They were accustomed to spend their afternoons off together, I understand."

"And the note?" asked Duvall, impatiently. "What did it say?"

"Merely that Noël was unable to keep his appointment for that afternoon, and did not expect to see his friend again before his departure. Seltz must have been planning some trip. The letter, as I remember, was quite cool, almost unfriendly in its tone."

Duvall glanced at his watch. "This was about one o'clock you say?"

"Yes. The matter has no significance. We are wasting our time discussing it."

"On the contrary, monsieur, I fear it may have had the greatest significance. That letter should never have been delivered. Even now, it may be too late to prevent the consequences. Be so good,

monsieur, as to conduct me to this man Noël's room at once." He turned to Dufrenne. "You will accompany us, of course, Monsieur Dufrenne," he said, then followed the Ambassador toward the hall.

In a few moments they reached the third floor of the house, and passed along a short hall which gave entrance to a rear extension of the building, in which the servants' quarters were located. At the entrance of the hall, a maid was seated upon a stool, reading a book. She rose as the others approached, and stood respectfully aside.

"Has anything been heard from Noël?" the Ambassador asked. "Has he asked for anything?"

"Nothing, monsieur. He has been quiet ever since six o'clock, when I took him his supper."

"What was he doing when you entered?"

"Writing, monsieur. He was sitting at the table, with a pen in his hand, and he looked up and told me to put the tray on the trunk. 'I shall ask you to take this letter to Monsieur de Grissac as soon as I have finished it,' he said. Since then I have heard nothing from him."

Duvall had preceded the Ambassador and Dufrenne to the door at the end of the short hall, and stood listening intently. In a moment, De Grissac came up, and, unlocking the door, threw it open. The room was dimly illuminated by a single candle, which smoked and guttered in its socket, apparently nearly burned out. Nothing was at first to be seen of the valet. Duvall stepped forward, then turned quickly and spoke. "Shut the door, please," he said in a tense voice.

Dufrenne did so, while the Ambassador strode forward and followed Duvall's gaze with a look of horror. On the floor beside the bed, and to the far side of the room from the door, lay the body of the unfortunate valet, his face, ghastly pale, turned toward the ceiling. But it was neither the sight of the man lying there, apparently dead, nor the agonized expression of his face, which caused both the Ambassador and Duvall to start back with exclamations of surprise. Across the man's lips was a great, dull-red blotch, which at first appeared to be a clot of blood, but which seemed, from its circular form and regular contour, more like a huge seal. And seal it was. Duvall, dropping on one knee beside the body, felt for the man's heart, at the same time looking closely at the mark upon his lips. He was quite dead, and had apparently been so for an hour or two. The blot upon his face was a great lump of red sealing wax, tightly binding together his lips, and upon it was the coarse imprint of a man's forefingers.

The Ambassador shrank back with a cry, as his eyes fell upon the ghastly sight. Dufrenne gazed at the dead man impassively. Duvall, springing to his feet, went at once to the window at the rear of the room, which stood partly open, and raising it to its full extent, looked out. The others heard him give utterance to a low whistle, as he drew back into the room.

"No one could have entered the room," cried the Ambassador, in a frightened voice. "It is thirty-five feet or more to the ground."

Duvall motioned to the window. "Look out, monsieur," he remarked, quietly.

De Grissac did so, then uttered a sudden cry. From the window to the garden below stretched a long slender wooden ladder. "It belongs to the men who have been repairing the rain spouting," he exclaimed. "They leave it in the garden, at night. I knew there was no way in which Noël could get out."

"But clearly a way, monsieur, by which others could get in," said Duvall, quietly, as he began a minute examination of the room.

"But the snuff box – do you think it has been taken away?"

"Undoubtedly, monsieur. I suspected as much, when you showed me the man's letter. Your servant, I have no doubt, took the box while shaving you this morning. You doubtless dozed off, thus giving him the opportunity. He did not know that you had taken snuff from the box this morning shortly after arising, and imagined, no doubt, that you would suppose you had lost it some time the night before. This would relieve him of any suspicion. He hurried off to his room to secrete the box, meaning to deliver it to this friend of his, Oscar Seltz, during the afternoon. His arraignment by you,

his subsequent imprisonment, no doubt frightened him and filled him with remorse – hence his rather unfriendly letter to Seltz. He had repented of his bargain, and was doubtless engaged in preparing a confession, telling you of his crime, and the reasons therefor, when the murderer entered the room.

"The latter, who probably was this man Seltz, must have become alarmed by the tone of Noël's letter. He was, it seems clear, planning some trip away from London, upon which he was about to leave. He meant to take the snuff box with him. Upon receiving Noël's letter he determined to see him and demand the box, if he found the latter had secured it. No doubt he made inquiries from some of the servants, on calling to see Noël, and was informed that he was confined to his room. He then pretended to leave, but in reality, ascended to the room by means of the ladder he found in the garden, while the servants were at dinner. It was a desperate chance, but he took it. Upon arriving in the room, he found Noël engaged in preparing his confession, insisted upon reading it, then realizing that his confederate was about to play him false, killed him, after gaining possession of the box, and departed."

The Ambassador uttered a groan. "My God," he moaned, "I am lost!"

Dufrenne, who meanwhile had been making a careful examination of the dead valet's body, rose with a mystified expression upon his face. "There are no wounds upon the body at all, Monsieur Duvall," he said. "How can you account for this man's death?"

Duvall stooped, and repeated the examination which his companion had just made. "You are right," he said. "The case is a most mysterious one."

"At least we can identify the murderer by the finger print upon the seal," De Grissac remarked, eagerly.

"I'm afraid not. This man Seltz cannot be quite a fool. Look!" He held up the forefinger of the dead man's right hand, upon which was a dull red burn, with bits of the red sealing wax about the nail. "He wasn't taking any chances." He let the already stiffening arm fall, and continued his examination of the body. "The method by which the man was killed," he remarked slowly, "is not yet clear to me. Certain finger prints on the throat indicate that he might have been strangled, but they are hardly deep or extensive enough for that. I fancy they would have resulted in temporary unconsciousness only. No – there is another reason – although what it is – " He paused as his eyes lit upon a thin shining object on the floor beside the table. "Oh, this may tell us something." He picked up the thing, which the others saw at once to be a large scarf pin, and examined it carefully.

"Did this belong to your servant, Monsieur de Grissac," he asked, holding the pin up to the light.

"Yes." The Ambassador glanced at the pin carelessly. "It was one of my own that I had given him, some months ago."

Duvall laid the scarf pin carefully upon the table, then went to the body on the floor, turned it over and made a careful examination of the back of the neck. He held the candle close, pushing aside the man's thin sandy hair. Presently he rose and placed the candle on the table beside the pin. "This was what your servant was killed with, Monsieur de Grissac," he said, as he indicated the scarf pin with his finger. "It was thrust violently into the spine, at the base of the brain. Only a tiny blood spot remains to tell the tale. This fellow Seltz is a shrewd customer."

"We do not even know that it was he who committed the crime. There is no real evidence against anyone. The snuff box may still be here. I insist that you make a thorough search."

"It would be useless, monsieur," Duvall remarked with a faint smile. "The box must have been on the table when the murderer entered the room."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise he would have searched for it, and you would have found everything in disorder. Believe me, monsieur, your servant had repented of his theft, and was about to return the box to you – it was that which caused his death. The seal upon his lips is a gruesome joke – silence – his lips are sealed – he can tell nothing."

"Seltz must be arrested at once," the Ambassador cried, in a rage.

"So far, monsieur, there is not the slightest evidence against him. Further, it is my opinion that he will leave London at once. Tell me the name of the shop in Piccadilly Circus where he was employed, and we will lose no further time in getting on his trail."

The Ambassador was not entirely certain of the location of the shop. He had never visited it. The name, he remembered, was given in the note as Perrier. The note had been delivered by one of the servants; he could tell where, and to whom he had delivered it.

Duvall recommended to the Ambassador that he report the murder to the police at once, but requested that no mention be made of the presence of himself and Monsieur Dufrenne. "We should be held as witnesses," he cautioned Monsieur de Grissac, "and that would seriously interfere with our plans. Let us interview the servant who took the letter at once."

The latter, a groom, was soon disposed of. He gave the number and location of the barber shop in Piccadilly Circus, a short distance away, and reported that he had handed the message to a dark, smooth-shaven man at the second chair. He did not know Seltz, but the proprietor had pointed him out in response to his inquiries. His description of the man was vague and unsatisfactory; he was unable to give any further information on the subject. Investigations as to anyone having made inquiries at the servants' entrance during the evening, regarding Noël, elicited the information that a heavily built, dark man, smooth-shaven, had called about half-past seven, and upon being informed that the valet was confined to his room and could not be seen, had disappeared. No one had taken any particular notice of his coming or going.

When the party had once more assembled in the reception-room, Duvall turned to Monsieur de Grissac. "There is nothing more to be accomplished here, monsieur," he remarked, quietly. "We will get after this fellow Seltz at once, and I trust that before long the missing snuff box will be returned to you."

The Ambassador shook hands with his guests, in a state of extreme agitation. "Lose no time," he urged. "You must recover the box before the thief has an opportunity to turn it over to those who are back of him, else it will be too late. I shall pray for your success." He stood at the door as his guests departed, shaking as though with a palsy. "It is a matter of greater moment than life itself. I trust you will not fail."

CHAPTER IV

Richard Duvall, accompanied by the silent little curio dealer, left the home of the French Ambassador and walked rapidly to the barber shop of Alphonse Perrier in Piccadilly Circus. They found the place without difficulty, a large and evidently prosperous establishment, located on the ground floor of a building, the upper rooms of which were devoted to business offices. A large plate glass window in front bore the sign, "Alphonse Perrier, Tonsorial Parlors."

The detective and his companion walked slowly past the brightly lighted window, their eyes taking in the details of the interior of the place. It was now close to ten o'clock, but the street was filled with pedestrians, and there were still one or two customers in the shop. At the first chair toward the door stood a large pasty-faced man, with a mop of bushy black hair, who was engaged in trimming a young man's mustache. The second chair was occupied by a man who was being shaved. The fellow who was shaving him answered in a general way to the descriptions of Seltz given by the Ambassador's servants. The third chair was unoccupied, and the man in charge of it, as well as those at the remaining two chairs, were engaged in putting away their razors and brushes, preparatory to leaving. It was evident that the closing hour was near at hand.

Duvall turned to his companion, "Monsieur Dufrenne," he said, "will you enter at once and take the third chair? Keep your eyes and ears open, and see what you can learn. I will wait here in the shadow of the next doorway. Our man is evidently inside. He will soon be leaving the shop. If he does so, before you do, I shall follow him. In that event, return to Monsieur de Grissac's house and wait there for word from me."

Dufrenne felt his stubbly beard. "It is fortunate, monsieur, that I have not been shaved since Monday," he said, as he entered the shop.

The man in charge of the third chair looked at him with a sulky expression as he took his seat. His companions grinned. Evidently he had not expected another customer before the closing hour. He began to shave the little old Frenchman with careless haste. The latter lay in his chair, with half-closed eyes, pretending to doze. In reality he was watching every movement of the man next to him.

The customer who occupied the second chair was a small, thin man, with sandy hair and a bony face. His eyes, rather prominent, under sparse red eyebrows, were closed as though in sleep. He was not paying the slightest attention to his surroundings, taking no notice whatever of Seltz, who was going over his face in a stolid and methodical way. There seemed nothing about either of them to attract attention – and Dufrenne began to wonder whether they might not after all be upon a false scent. The man Seltz showed neither haste nor nervousness in his movements – if he was in a hurry to finish his work for the evening, and leave the place, he certainly did not show it.

After a time, Dufrenne observed that the thin man in the chair next to him had opened his eyes, and was feeling his jaw with much satisfaction. "A very good shave, my good fellow," he said, in excellent English, without a trace of any foreign accent. "What powder was that you used, may I ask?"

Dufrenne, who was observing Seltz carelessly, saw a sudden change come over him. His eyes lit up with interest, and a slight flush overspread his face. There seemed nothing in so simple a question to arouse him in this way, and Dufrenne watched him carefully, his senses keenly alert for anything of interest. To his disappointment, Seltz's answer was of the most commonplace character. "It is a special kind, which Monsieur Perrier has made for him, after his own formula. 'Poudre Perrier,' it is called." He turned to the case behind him, opened a drawer and brought forth a round cardboard box. "Eightpence is the price. Would you like to try a box?" He extended the package toward his customer, who had risen and was adjusting his scarf at the mirror.

The man turned and glanced carelessly at the box. "Oh, you might wrap it up. I shave myself, occasionally, when I'm traveling. Eightpence, you say?"

"Yes, sir." Seltz turned to the case and began to do up the package in a piece of brown paper. In a few moments he turned and handed it to his customer, who had drawn on his coat, and was preparing to leave the place. Dufrenne saw him put his hand into his pocket and draw out some money, which he handed to Seltz. The latter nodded gravely and placed it in his pocket. The thin-faced man did the same with the package, then left the shop. There was nothing in the least suspicious about the whole transaction, and the little Frenchman contented himself with observing Seltz as he put away his brushes and prepared to stop work for the day. Once he saw the man draw something from his pocket and glance hurriedly at it, but his back was toward the chair in which Dufrenne sat, and he could not see what it was. A sense of uneasiness filled him, however, as the man who was shaving him drew away the sheet from about his shoulders and stepped back to allow him to rise.

He made his way to the street as quickly as possible. Seltz was still occupied in putting away his shaving implements.

On reaching the pavement, Dufrenne turned and walked rapidly toward Charing Cross. He did not wish to join Duvall in sight of those within. He had taken but a few paces when the latter caught up to him. "What did you learn?" the detective asked, quickly.

Dufrenne related in a few words what had occurred in the shop. He failed to note the excitement with which the detective listened to his story. "It may have been the snuff box," Duvall cried, moving forward rapidly in his excitement. "A clever scheme, I must say." He looked about eagerly for the man who had left the shop so short a time before, but he had disappeared in the darkness. "If you could only have warned me in some way."

"It was impossible, monsieur," said Dufrenne much crestfallen. "I could not leave the chair until the man had finished shaving me."

"Of course not," replied Duvall, uncertain what course to pursue next. "The man went in this direction. I noticed him particularly. Perhaps if I were to hurry I might overtake him." He started forward. "You stay here and watch Seltz. If I do not return, report to me at Monsieur de Grissac's." He turned and disappeared in the crowd.

Dufrenne went slowly back to the neighborhood of the shop, and stood in the shadow of the doorway, waiting. Presently he observed two of the assistants, in street clothes, leave the place and hurry off into the darkness. Neither of them was Seltz. The lights in the shop began to go out. Another assistant left. Only Seltz and the proprietor now remained within. He crept toward the window, and cautiously looked inside. Monsieur Perrier stood before one of the mirrors, arranging his bushy hair. *There was no one else in the shop.*

CHAPTER V

Grace Duvall arrived at the house of the American Minister at about half-past five, and luckily found him at home. From the maid at the hotel she had learned that his name was Phelps, Austin Phelps, and she at once recognized it as that of a lawyer prominent in business and social circles in New York. That he should know her, at least by name, was not at all surprising – her aunt, prior to her marriage to Count d'Este, had been much courted on account of both her beauty and her wealth. She waited in the handsome drawing-room to which she had been conducted, nervously wondering what the nature of her reception would be. The card she had given to the servant was one of her own – in fact, she remembered with a smile that her marriage to Richard Duvall but a few hours before had so filled her mind and heart that she had completely forgotten to have any cards prepared setting forth her new estate. It was as Grace Ellicott that the Minister would know her, however, and her business in Brussels made it desirable that she should pose as a single woman. It was not at all difficult, she thought to herself, under the circumstances.

Mr. Phelps, the Minister, proved to be a rubicund, rather portly gentleman, with white side whiskers and an air of urbane courtesy that set her at her ease at once. She told him who she was, hopefully, and was delighted to find that he placed her at once.

"Margaret Ellicott's niece," he said with a pleasant smile, offering his hand. "My dear girl, I'm delighted to meet you. I knew your aunt well, years ago, when you were going about in short dresses. I lost sight of her, after she married D'Este, and went to Paris to live. It was only the other day that I learned of her death. She was a fine woman. Mrs. Phelps and myself were both very fond of her. Won't you take a seat and tell me what you are doing in Brussels?"

Grace sat down, and at once plunged into her story. "I have suffered a great deal, lately, Mr. Phelps," she began, "from nervousness. I've been living in Paris, you know, and many things have happened to upset me. You have heard, of course, of the Count d'Este's treatment of me, and of his arrest and conviction?"

"Yes." He nodded gravely. "I do not wonder that you feel upset."

"Of late I have suffered a great deal from attacks of sleep walking. I get up at night and wander about, without knowing what I am doing. One night, I went out on the balcony and nearly walked off into the street." She lied bravely, hoping that her story would appear plausible.

"Too bad," Mr. Phelps remarked, evidently somewhat surprised that she should confide such matters to him. "You are under treatment, of course."

"No – that is, not at present. No one in Paris has been able to do me any good. I have heard so much of Dr. Hartmann and his marvelous success with all sorts of mental and nervous troubles that I have decided to consult him. That is why I came to Brussels."

"I see. Well – he's a splendid man. You couldn't do better. I know him very well, and like him immensely. A thorough scientist. Have you seen him, yet?"

"No. I – I understood that he does not care to take patients without references as to their standing, financial and otherwise."

"My dear girl, you would have no trouble. Of course he is overrun with patients – and as his sanatorium is a small one, he is obliged to charge large fees and take only the best and wealthiest class. He is an investigator, rather than a practitioner, and for that reason is obliged to guard his time."

"Then may I ask that you will give me a letter to him?" Grace said, hesitatingly.

"Certainly. I'll do it gladly. When do you intend to call on him?"

"I thought of going at once."

"Then I'll do better than give you a letter. I'll call him up by telephone and make an appointment for you. Say in half an hour. It will take you about twenty minutes to drive to his place. Will that be convenient?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Phelps, and thank you very much."

"Nonsense, my dear girl. Only too happy to do it for you. You must come and meet Mrs. Phelps, later on, and dine with us. Just at present she is out, taking tea with some friends. I want you to know her." He rose and started toward the door. "Excuse me for a few moments, while I telephone the doctor."

Grace, left alone, could not help regretting the deceit she had been obliged to practise upon her aunt's old friend, but there seemed to be no help for it. She only hoped that nothing would occur, subsequently, to involve the latter in any disagreeable explanations.

Mr. Phelps returned to the drawing-room in a few moments, his face weathered in smiles of satisfaction. "You're lucky," he said. "Dr. Hartmann tells me that he can accommodate you at once, as he discharged one of his patients, cured, only this morning. If you propose to remain at his house for treatment, which would be the only satisfactory way, I would suggest that you drive around by way of your hotel and arrange to have your baggage sent at once. I have written the address, and a few words to the doctor, on this card. Any of the cab drivers will know it, of course. Dr. Hartmann is one of the most prominent men in Brussels. I wish you good luck in your stay at his place, and whenever you are in the city, come in and have luncheon. Mrs. Phelps will be delighted." He led the way to the door, and ushered the girl into her cab. "Glad I was able to be of service to you," he said, as she drove off. "Good-evening."

When Grace entered the office of Dr. Hartmann, she was quite conscious of the fact that it would not be necessary for her to pretend to be nervous. In fact she felt herself turning hot and cold with fear, and wondered whether she would have the courage to play the part which had been so unexpectedly thrust upon her.

The place itself was pleasant and attractive enough in appearance. It consisted of a large stone building, with a mansard roof, set back some hundred or more yards from the street, and surrounded by a small park, filled with trees and shrubbery. A well-kept gravel driveway led from the gate to the main entrance, which opened into a large hall. She observed as she came in, a sort of parlor, or reception-room, to the right, handsomely furnished in rather an old-fashioned style, with a large marble mantel and fireplace at one end of it. In the latter a blaze of cannel coal lit up the room with a pleasant radiance. It was not yet dark without, and the lights in the reception room were unlit, although a lamp was burning in the hall.

The maid who admitted her, a pleasant-faced German woman of middle age, conducted her into the reception-room, and taking her card, disappeared down the hall. In a few moments she returned, and nodding to Grace, opened a door at the left of the hall and bade her enter.

She found herself in the doctor's office, a large room, furnished in leather. A table in the center contained a lamp, and many magazines and papers. There was no one in the room when she entered, but before she had time to select a chair, a door at the rear of the room opened, and Dr. Hartmann came in.

He was a man of powerful build, and gave one the impression of great size, although not in reality above medium height. His shoulders, however, were very broad and thick, his neck short and powerful, his head large, with heavy iron-gray hair. A short beard of the same color covered the lower part of his face, while through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles his eyes shone with piercing brightness. Grace thought, as he came toward her, that she had seldom seen a more striking-looking man.

"Be seated, miss," he said, addressing her in English, though with a decided accent. "You are Miss Grace Ellicott, I believe." He glanced at the card which he held in his hand.

"Yes," said Grace, nervously taking a seat.

"Mr. Phelps tells me you suffer from somnambulism," the doctor went on. "How long have you observed the symptoms?"

"About six months," answered Grace, steadily.

"Are the occurrences frequent?"

"Yes. Almost every night."

"Had you experienced any great shock, about the time these manifestations began?"

"Yes. My aunt, whom I loved very dearly, had died."

"Oh! And when you walk in your sleep, do you seem to see her?"

Grace reflected over this question for several moments. Then she recollected that persons given to somnambulism never remember their experiences. "No. I have no recollection of what occurs."

The doctor's face was lit with a satisfied smile. He came over to Grace, drew apart the lids of one of her eyes and gazed into it, looked at her hands critically, felt her pulse for a moment, then asked suddenly, "Have you ever been placed under the influence of hypnosis?"

She trembled. If this man were to hypnotize her, as she was perfectly certain that he could, he might force her to tell him everything, and thereby endanger the success of the whole plan. "No," she replied, firmly. "I should not care for it."

"It is a method of treatment, miss, which I use a great deal."

"I hope it will not be necessary, doctor, to use it upon me. I have always had a horror of being hypnotized. Please do not attempt it."

"Very well, miss," the doctor laughed. "It may not be necessary. Before we go further with your case, I shall want to observe it carefully for a few days. You understand my terms, of course." The doctor named a large sum. "So much each week, and an additional charge for my services, depending upon the nature of the case."

Grace nodded, although the amount was sufficiently large to stagger her. "I shall gladly pay what you ask," she said, "if you can only cure me." She rose as the doctor stepped to the side of the room and pressed an electric button.

"You can go to your room at once, Miss Ellicott," the doctor went on. "One of the maids will conduct you. Your meals will be served there, or you can eat in the large dining-room, as you prefer. There are only twenty other patients. Some of them you might find very agreeable. Make yourself thoroughly at home. There are many excellent books in the library, and you will perhaps wish to walk in the grounds, or visit your friends in the city. The nature of your case is such that no particular regimen, no rules of health are necessary. Remember, however, that we close the gates of the park at sundown. I will see you again, this evening, and bring you some medicine. It is merely a sedative, to quiet your nerves. It is not possible to do much for complaints such as yours, by means of drugs." He turned, as a quiet, pleasant-faced woman opened the door. "Anna," he said to her in German, "conduct Miss Ellicott to her room, and make her comfortable."

Not wishing to endure the ordeal of dining with strangers, Grace decided to have her dinner served in her room. She found it excellent, and very well cooked. After dinner she sat in an easy chair by the large electric lamp and read a book she had brought with her.

At ten o'clock Dr. Hartmann came in, and asked her a few more questions, gave the nurse a small bottle containing a dark brown liquid and instructed her as to administering it, then said good-night and went out. Grace threw down her book, and announced that she was ready to retire. The maid assisted her to undress, gave her a few drops of the medicine in a small glass of sherry, put out the light, and departed, informing Grace that she would be in the hall, within call, if the latter wished anything.

In spite of the medicine which she had taken, Grace was far too nervous and excited to fall asleep. She realized the daring nature of the game she had been called upon to play, and for a moment her spirits sank and she felt a sense of fear. Thoughts of Richard, however, soon restored her courage. She would face any danger to serve him. How different from what she had imagined, was this, her first night of married life! Instead of lying in Richard's arms, on board the steamer bound for America, here she was, a patient in a sanatorium in Brussels. The thing seemed unreal – impossible.

After a while, the noises of the house ceased one by one. As midnight struck, all was dark and silent. Only the faint sound of the wind among the trees in the park came to her ears. She wondered whether it was necessary for her to pretend to walk in her sleep this night – in order that the doctor might feel that her case was a real one. She rose softly, undecided, and going to the window, looked out.

The room in which she then was, occupied a position at the rear of the building, and in one of its two wings. From the center of the main building she observed a covered passageway, or bridge, extending out for perhaps a hundred feet and terminating in a sort of square tower. In one of the rooms in the tower, on a level with herself, she saw lights, and the figure of a man moving about.

The place attracted her attention. She wondered what its use could be. Then an inspiration struck her. The covered bridge ran from the main hall not thirty feet from her own door. She determined to cross it, pretending to be walking in her sleep, and find out what she could regarding the brick tower. When the time came, she knew that all the information she could possess about the house and its occupants would be necessary to the success of her plans.

She threw about her a dressing-gown, and quietly opened her door. The maid was nowhere to be seen, but doubtless she would shortly return. The chair upon which she had been sitting, at the point where the side and main halls met, stood directly beneath the electric light. No doubt, Grace thought, she had been called away for a few moments by one of the other patients on the floor.

Now was her chance. She stepped noiselessly down the cross hall, her eyes wide open and hands clenched at her sides. At the junction of the two halls she turned to the right, toward a door which, she judged, gave entrance to the covered way. She found this unlocked, opened it, entered the passageway and closed the door behind her. Then she began to walk slowly along the bridge.

It was a narrow structure, not exceeding five feet in width, with top and sides of corrugated metal, and a floor of wooden planks. At the far end of it she perceived a glass door, behind which shone a brilliant light.

She approached the door cautiously, keeping up all the while the pretense of walking in her sleep. This was not easy – she did not know just how persons who were somnambulists acted, but she had read descriptions of such cases, and had once seen a play in which one of the characters was a sleep walker. She tried to give her eyes a vacant, unseeing expression, and fearlessly approached the door.

It stood slightly ajar, and through the glass panels she saw at once that the room was Dr. Hartmann's laboratory. She arrived at this conclusion from the various medical appliances which stood about the room, the uses of which she did not know. Her inspection of the room, however, was but momentary, for two figures, brightly illuminated by an overhanging cluster of electric lights, at once attracted her attention. One of these was Dr. Hartmann. He sat at a large, flat-topped desk, his profile toward the door, examining with great care a mass of papers which lay on the desk before him. His forehead was wrinkled with thought, and an expression of anger dominated his face.

At the other side of the desk sat a tall spare man, with a military-looking carriage, and a fierce blond mustache, which he was gnawing uneasily. The two figures sat silent for several moments, no word passing between them, while Grace watched intently. Presently she heard the doctor speak. "It took you two years, it seems, to find out that Monsieur de Grissac uses snuff."

The other nodded. "One year and ten months, to be exact."

"And now," the doctor went on, angrily, "you trust everything to a stranger."

"It is better so, is it not? The affair is dangerous. Neither you, nor I, can afford to be mixed up in it."

Doctor Hartmann brought his fist down upon the desk with a bang. "*Gott in Himmel!*" he roared. "We must take some risks, my friend. I tell you I must have De Grissac's snuff box without further delay. If that does not solve the problem, we are at the end of our rope."

"It will solve it," the other man replied imperturbably. "I have positive assurances to that effect. Furthermore, I have every reason to believe that we shall hear from London before the end of the week."

"Have you received any word?" the doctor inquired eagerly.

"Yes. The attempt was to be made either to-day or to-morrow. Our man will report to you at once. He knows nothing of the matter, of course. He will deliver the box to you, and receive the money."

"Who is the fellow?"

"I do not know his name. I have not seen him, myself. Gratz arranged everything in London. I considered it very important that nothing should occur which would connect us with the matter in any way. Monsieur de Grissac will discover his loss very quickly and will use every effort to prevent the box from falling into our hands. Gratz and the others would invite suspicion at once. The fellow they have chosen to handle the matter is unknown to the French police. He will attract no attention. The plan appears to be perfect."

The doctor nodded slowly, chewing on his cigar. "I hope you are right, Mayer," he said, and looked at his watch.

As he finished speaking, Grace heard someone approaching her from behind, but she paid no attention. In a moment the attendant touched her lightly on the arm. She turned, gazing at the woman with staring, unseeing eyes. The latter looked at her keenly, then began to lead her along the bridge toward the main building.

When they reached her bedroom, the nurse turned on the lights suddenly, glancing at Grace's face as she did so. The girl did not dare even to blink her eyes. "Sit down," the woman commanded, sharply. Grace sank upon the edge of the bed. "Take off your shoes," the nurse went on, in a stern voice. The girl had slipped on a pair of bedroom slippers – she proceeded to remove them mechanically, fumbling with them as though trying to unfasten the laces of a pair of shoes. "Now your dress," the nurse ordered. Grace began awkwardly to remove the dressing-gown she had thrown about her. When the woman told her sharply to get into bed, she did so without a word, apparently quite unconscious of what she was doing. It was a splendid piece of acting, and she did it so well that if the nurse had any doubts as to the reality of her somnambulistic condition they were at once dispelled. As soon as the girl placed her head upon the pillows, she pretended to be sound asleep, her eyes closed, her breathing regular and slow. After a time, the attendant put out the light and left the room.

The girl lay still for hours, wondering what there was in the strange conversation she had overheard that could help Richard in his efforts to recover the stolen snuff box. That it had been stolen she knew; that it had not yet been delivered to Dr. Hartmann she also knew. Perhaps Richard might have succeeded in recovering it before now; if not, the messenger bringing it to the doctor's office would undoubtedly arrive the next day. She determined to rise early, in order that she might, if possible, send word of what she had heard to Brussels by means of the young man who drove the delivery wagon.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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